

ANALYZING ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS* THROUGH THE LENS OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) portrays oppression faced by the marginalized people in Indian society. The research paper employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its theoretical framework. The paper describes the ways in which race, gender and class create differences. The basic tenets of CRT highlight the ways when power marginalizes specific groups in order to prioritize others. The paper also explores the dominant narratives in Indian society and offers various perspectives. It also foregrounds the observations and experiences of those who are mistreated. The selected extracts from the novel maintain that the novelist employs various traits of CRT – social construction of race, intersectionality, structural racism, counter story-telling and microaggression – in her novel. The paper ends with the suggestion that CRT can be applied in literary studies in order to explore multiple ways of oppressions, targeted against the marginalized people.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Critical Race Theory, Dominant narrative, Power, Social construction of race, Structural racism, Intersectionality, Counter Story-telling, Social hierarchies and Microaggression.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017, has gained fame across the globe. The story of the novel presents the marginalized people – the transgenders, the Kashmiri separatists and Dalits. Their lives are trapped by social injustice and political turmoil's. Furthermore, the novel deals with the themes of race, class, gender, identity and religion. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* got literary acclaim as soon as it got published. What fascinates the readers is the description of lively characters, presented in the novel. The New York Time and the Washington Post declare it one of the best books of 2017. Short listed for the Man Booker Prize 2017, the novel is translated in more than 40 languages.

The novel portrays the lives of the marginalized people who are not in the main stream society. It is worth noticing that Arundhati Roy is a popular political activist. She uses this novel as a medium for exploring multiple issues, concerning with caste, class, race and gender. The paper chooses the Critical Race Theory as critical framework. Initially, CRT was used in the legal studies later on, it has been employed in other domains e.g. cultural studies, sociology and literature. At its best CRT is employed to find out the ways in which race can be used as a social construct. When observed through a CRT lens, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* challenges the popular narratives above Indian society. The society prioritizes upper cast Hindu's while excluding specific groups at the same time.

Significance of Study

The research will contribute to a comprehensive account of how race, class, gender and caste prepare the mindset, regarding postcolonial literature. While using CRT as theoretical framework, the study will examine how different social categories are presented in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The study will enable readers to gain an in-depth insight into social hierarchies presented in the novel.

Statement of Problem

The research gap found in the existing body of the literature is a need for a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which multiple forms of the oppression against the marginalized people in Indian society intersect. Usually, it is considered difficult to disentangle the issues and to find out the ways which have become the traits of privilege and power.

Objectives of the Study

Following are the major objectives of the study:

1. To explore the representation of race, caste, class, and gender in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.
2. To apply the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory for examining the ways which construct not only power relations, but also social hierarchies.

Research Question

How can Critical Race Theory be applied to analyze race, gender, caste and class in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*?

Literature review**i. Critical Race Theory**

In his seminal work Edward Said (1997) has analyzed how Western societies consider the "Orient" an inferior other. The West's knowledge of the East is informed by ideological relations. Said has opined that the West uses Orientalism as a way to justify its domination and exploitation of the East. While portraying the Orient as backward, the West constructs a binary opposition between itself and the East. The work has been globally influential in postcolonial studies.

Crenshaw (1989) maintains that in order to fully address the experiences of violence against women of color, intersectionality should be taken into account. Crenshaw explores how anti-discrimination laws failed to describe for the unique experiences of women of color, facing discrimination on the basis of both race and gender. Intersectionality interacts in complicated ways.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have given a comprehensive description of Critical Race Theory. The framework emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the limitations of traditional civil rights approaches to address the issue of racial injustice. The authors have traced the origins of CRT to various social movements. CRT provides a useful lens for understanding how race intersects with other systems of oppression. The authors find out the basic concepts and themes within CRT. Their emphasis is centered on challenging dominant narratives and power structures. They have examined the implications of CRT in various domains e.g. law, education, and activism.

In his seminal work Fanon (2008) has explored the psychological impact of colonialism and racism on the black individual. It is found that colonized individual internalizes the racist stereotypes and values of the colonizers, leading to a fragmentation of their identity and a rejection of their own culture and history. The work has been highly influential in postcolonial and critical race theory.

Hooks (1990) has examined the interconnections between race, gender, and cultural politics. In her feminist and anti-racist analysis, she has opined that the experiences of people of color, particularly women, are often marginalized in mainstream society. She criticises the white-centeredness of feminist theory. There is a need for an intersectional approach, recognizing the ways in which different forms of oppression are intersected. What Hooks supports is radical politics of solidarity in this regard.

Kumari and Singh (2019) conduct a comprehensive study on Critical Race Theory (CRT) while analyzing its major concepts, and its application in domains of law, education, and sociology. They give importance to knowledge of the intersectionality of race with other social constructs. They also underscore the role of storytelling and counter-narratives in CRT in order to challenge dominant discourses.

Spivak (1988) criticises Western academic discourses about colonialism and its influence on non-Western communities. The subaltern groups are marginalized by dominant power structures. Usually, they are neglected within academic and political discourses. The author argues that these voices are necessary in order to understand the intricate power dynamics of colonialism.

Yosso (2005) regards the concept of "community cultural wealth" as a counter-narrative to deficit thinking about marginalized communities. Certain cultural resources and skills can be taken as assets for communities of color. While employing Critical Race Theory, the study challenges dominant narratives, portraying communities of color. Recognition of these forms of community cultural wealth is mandatory for an equitable social system.

ii. CRT and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Roy's novel can be seen as a form of counter-narrative to dominant discourses about race, caste, class, and gender in India. Counter-narratives are an important aspect of critical race theory and serve to challenge dominant power structures and perspectives (Ladson-Billings). The novel also highlights the importance of storytelling and narrative in shaping our understanding of race and identity (Bell, 1992).

Dixit (2018) analyzes *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from a postmodernist perspective. It is argued that the novel uses postmodernist techniques in order to subvert dominant narratives about identity, history, and power. Roy has portrayed characters and settings, challenging the idea of a singular, fixed identity. The findings of the study have demonstrated that the novel can be considered of a postmodernist critique of the oppressive power structures in Indian society.

Dua (2019) has explored the theme of care in Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* via a postcolonial angle. It is found that the novel offers an alternative approach to ethics and politics. The study finds out the characters in the novel engage in practices of care towards one another.

Kapoor (2018) has focused on the concept of invisibility in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from a postcolonial perspective. The novelist's presentation of marginalization, oppression, and resistance is deeply rooted in the colonial history of the sub-continent. The main characters in the novel are considered invisible by the dominant society.

In their study Vaishnavi and Bhat (2019) have examined the representation of dispossessed individuals in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through a Dalit feminist perspective. Roy's has portrayed the marginalized communities in India, including Dalits and Muslims. The novel has

highlighted their struggles against various forms of oppression. It sheds light on the intersections of caste, class, gender, and religion in India.

The Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that originated in legal scholarship and has since been applied to various fields, including education, sociology, and literature. The foundational texts of CRT include the work of scholars such as Bell (1992), Delgado and Stefencic (2001), and Crenshaw (1989). CRT seeks to understand how race intersects with other forms of oppression, including class, gender, and race, and how these intersections create and maintain systems of power and privilege. The central concepts of CRT include the social construction of race, microaggressions, structural racism, counter-storytelling, and intersectionality. These are different forms of oppression that intersect and interact with each other. CRT emphasizes the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities and challenging dominant narratives. The present study employs this framework in order to analyze the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, regarding race, caste, class and gender.

Textual Analysis

Some extracts from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are selected in order to analyze the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory, presented in the novel.

Social Construction of Race

On the streets of Old Delhi, the Jamun trees were heavy with purple fruit, and Hijras (transgender) wearing bright saris cajoled money from passing motorists. They called out blessings and curses in voices that were both male and female, their breasts lumpy from hormone therapy, and their faces bearded and smooth. They were not men, nor women, nor were they a gender that could be labeled, and so they were neither here nor there. They were Hijras, and to the people of Old Delhi, they were nothing more than a disturbance, a jarring interruption in the daily routine of the city.

The extract illustrates how race and gender are social constructs that are created and enforced by dominant societal norms and institutions. The Hijras are marginalized and excluded from mainstream society because they do not conform to traditional gender categories, which are constructed and reinforced by patriarchal and heteronormative social structures. The passage also demonstrates how the social construction of race and gender can intersect, as the Hijras' non-conforming gender identity is further stigmatized by their marginalized status as a religious and cultural minority in India.

On the crowded road outside, the Sikhs and the Muslims and the Hindus were looking at each other. They could tell each other apart. They could. But why should they? Their heads were covered or uncovered in different ways, they spoke in different tongues, but when it came down to it, they were all made of the same dust. They were all made of the same matter. They were all made of atoms that had participated in the Big Bang fourteen billion years ago. And inside those atoms, inside those protons and electrons, were tiny particles that were identical in Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus alike.

This extract challenges the notion that race is a biological fact by emphasizing the ways in which race is socially constructed. The characters in the novel can tell each other apart based on their external characteristics such as their head coverings and language, but the narrator emphasizes that they are all made of the same matter and particles. This suggests that race is not a biological fact but a social construct that is based on external characteristics and has been created and reinforced by social and historical factors. By highlighting the ways in which race is a social

construct, the novel challenges the dominant narrative that portrays race as a fixed biological category and instead encourages readers to question the ways in which race is constructed and perpetuated in society.

In India, 'fairness' is a highly desirable attribute. Dark-skinned people face discrimination and colorism, and many Indians buy into the notion that light skin is superior. [...] Even in the more enlightened circles of Delhi, where people prided themselves on their liberal attitudes, the legacy of colonialism was hard to shake. They wanted 'convent-educated' brides and grooms, and people still spoke nostalgically of 'the Raj.'

This extract highlights the social construction of race in India and how the legacy of colonialism has shaped attitudes towards skin color and other markers of racial identity. The preference for light skin and the discrimination faced by dark-skinned people is a form of colorism, which is a result of the social construction of race that privileges certain physical features over others. The legacy of colonialism is also evident in the continued glorification of Western culture and education, as seen in the preference for "convent-educated" individuals and the nostalgic reminiscing of the British colonial era.

Intersectionality

The azaan had just begun when a small, dark, triangular bird flew in through the window and landed on the white marble floor. It was a sparrow. The azaan, the bird, the light filtering through the stained glass windows – all of it had come together in a way that made Anjum's heart swell. She had never felt so alive. She put her head on the floor and cried. The sparrow, startled by her sudden movement, flew back out through the open window. But the feeling remained. It was like a tiny, glowing bead, lodged inside her, emitting a warmth that spread through her body and calmed her like nothing else could.

The excerpt shows the concept of intersectionality by showing how Anjum's experiences of identity are shaped by multiple factors, including her gender, religion, and social status. Anjum is a Hijra, a religious and cultural minority in India who are often ostracized and discriminated against because of their non-conforming gender identity. Anjum's experiences of marginalization are further compounded by her lower social status, as she comes from a poor background and lacks the education and resources that would enable her to navigate society more easily.

Saddam Hussain had been a Shia from a village near the Iraqi border. His father was a labourer who had migrated to Delhi in search of work. Saddam's mother was a Sunni from Old Delhi, with roots in Rajasthan. Saddam's parents had met in a factory where they both worked. They had fallen in love and married in defiance of their families. For years, they had lived in a one-room tenement in Old Delhi, their house filled with the voices of children and the smells of spice and sweat.

This extract depicts the intersecting identities of Saddam Hussain's parents, who come from different religious and regional backgrounds. It highlights how identities such as religion, class, and ethnicity can intersect and shape a person's experiences of marginalization. The excerpt emphasizes the importance of personal agency and resistance in the face of intersecting forms of oppression. Saddam's parents defied their families and societal norms by marrying across religious and regional lines, and their love and determination allowed them to create a home and family despite their limited resources and marginalization.

The air was thick with the smells of cow dung, diesel fumes, and hot tar. The pavement was slick with rainwater and urine, and in the dim light, the tarpaulin shacks and broken walls looked like

a stage set for a dystopian film. [...] The women who lived in the shacks were Dalit, the so-called Untouchables, and most of them had migrated from rural areas to work as manual scavengers.

In this extract, the author Arundhati Roy touches on the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class in the lived experiences of the Dalit women who live in the slums of Delhi. The Dalit community, also known as the Untouchables, are historically marginalized and discriminated against in Indian society due to their low caste status. The fact that most of the women are manual scavengers - a form of manual labor that involves cleaning human waste - further compounds their marginalized status and highlights the intersections of caste and gender oppression.

Radical feminists said that Hijras were not women because they did not have vaginas. Queer activists said Hijras were not men because they dressed like women. Employers said they were not human, that they were mutilated freaks who no one would hire. Landlords said they were not tenants, that they were vermin who needed to be exterminated. The police said they were not entitled to justice, that they were a scandal and a disgrace.

This extract illustrates how the Hijras in India face multiple forms of oppression and marginalization due to the intersection of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. The Hijras are subjected to discrimination and violence not only from individuals but also from societal institutions such as employers, landlords, and the police.

Structural Racism

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the parent organization of the ruling party, had spent decades planting the seeds of communalism in India. It had perverted history and hijacked language, even 'secularism,' to create a narrative of Hindu victimhood and Muslim aggression. It had seeped into the educational system, rewriting textbooks, hiring pliant academics. It had insinuated itself into the media, ensuring that the airwaves were filled with its talking points and that the headlines reinforced its worldview. It had spawned numerous other organizations that had, over time, made their way into every institution of the country, from universities to the army to the police to the bureaucracy.

The above extract maintains how structural racism operates in India, where the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization, has created and perpetuated a narrative of Hindu victimhood and Muslim aggression. This narrative has infiltrated various societal institutions, such as education, media, and government, influencing policies and shaping public opinion. Structural racism is a form of racism that is embedded within the very structures and institutions of society, perpetuating racial inequalities and injustices through policies, practices, and norms. In the case of India, the RSS's influence on societal institutions has created a culture of Hindu nationalism that marginalizes and discriminates against Muslim individuals and communities.

Those who did not fit the stereotype of what a Kashmiri was supposed to look like had always struggled with it. And then came the violence, the impunity, the fake encounters, the disappearances, the torture, the daily humiliations at checkpoints, the constant reminder that the land was not yours, that you were not free, that you were being watched, followed, monitored, and recorded. It was there in the streets, it was there on the roads, it was there in the markets, it was there in the mosques and temples, it was there in the schools and colleges, it was there in the fields and forests, it was there in the air you breathed.

It can be observed how structural racism is deeply embedded in the social, political, and economic structures of society. The violence, impunity, and daily humiliations faced by Kashmiris reflect the systemic and institutionalized discrimination and marginalization that they have been

subjected to for decades. The checkpoints, surveillance, and monitoring also indicate the ways in which the state has employed structural mechanisms to maintain control and subjugate the Kashmiri people.

She [Anjum] was now a free agent, a person of no consequence, nobody's responsibility. It was terrifying and liberating at the same time. She missed the security of the Khwabgah, but she knew that she would never go back there. She had seen too much. Learned too much. Been too much a part of too many things. And there was the matter of the new National Security Act. It made it possible to arrest and imprison anyone, anywhere, for any length of time, without trial.

The passage highlights the impact of structural racism on marginalized communities in India, specifically the Muslim community. The new National Security Act mentioned in the passage is a law that was passed in India in the name of national security but has been criticized for targeting and marginalizing Muslim communities. The law allows for the arrest and imprisonment of individuals without trial, which is a violation of human rights and an example of structural racism.

The lives of Muslims in India had become a kind of walking nightmare. [...] When the police picked up young Muslim men and took them to jail, it was under the pretext of protecting them from Hindu mobs. [...] When the police shot at Muslim crowds, they said they were doing it to prevent them from rioting. [...] When they set fire to Muslim homes, they said it was to stop the spread of fire to Hindu homes. [...] The police claimed they were taking action against a culture of terror that had embedded itself in Muslim neighborhoods. [...] There were new laws that allowed the police to hold people without bail and without a trial. [...] The new laws applied mostly to Muslims.

The above excerpt highlights the systemic and institutionalized nature of racism against Muslims in India. The discriminatory treatment and violence against Muslims are carried out by the police and supported by government policies and laws that target Muslim communities. The police use various pretexts to justify their actions, such as protecting them from Hindu mobs, prevent riots, and combating terrorism, but these justifications are often used as a cover for the racism and Islamophobia that underlie their actions.

The city was full of the ghosts of displaced people. They had been moved out of their homes to make way for highways, power lines, and public buildings. Their shacks and slums had been bulldozed and they had been herded into resettlement colonies on the outskirts of the city, where they waited for water, electricity, and sanitation. The city was a graveyard of dead and dying neighborhoods. When the rains came, the city flooded. The water rose and it did not recede. It stayed for weeks, for months, until the government declared a state of emergency and airlifted supplies to the marooned.

This extract highlights the structural racism that exists in Indian society, particularly in the context of urban development and displacement. The displacement of marginalized communities, often for the benefit of the more privileged, is a result of structural racism that privileges certain groups while disadvantaging others. The government's failure to provide basic infrastructure and services to these displaced communities further perpetuates this structural racism.

Microaggression

Anjum went up to the counter and said, 'Half a kilo of potatoes please.' The man at the counter looked at her as though she had spoken in Chinese. He didn't say anything. He just looked at her with disdain. She repeated her request, this time in Hindi. The man continued to stare at her. Anjum looked around the shop, and saw that everyone else was being served. Everyone else except her.

She was about to leave the shop when the man turned to his colleague and said, 'Can you believe it? We're not even safe from Hijras in our own shops now.'

This extract highlights the experience of microaggressions faced by Anjum, a Hijra character in the novel. Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination that are often unintentional, but can still have a significant impact on the individual experiencing them. In this case, Anjum is subjected to discriminatory treatment by the shopkeeper who refuses to serve her, and then makes a derogatory comment about her gender identity.

Ajumobi had picked up several passengers, but the older woman in the back seat was the only one who looked at Anjum with the expression that said, Oh! I thought you were a woman. Anjum recognized the look; she had seen it many times before. It was the Manjula Saxena, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. look, the it's-not-a-problem-but-it-is-a-problem look, the let's-be-polite-but-let's-not-pretend-you-are-what-you-are-not look.

The above passage shows how microaggressions are a form of subtle discrimination that often go unnoticed or unacknowledged. The older woman in the back seat's expression towards Anjum reflects a common microaggression experienced by transgender individuals, where their gender identity is questioned or invalidated.

Aftab looked at him, looked at him closely. He noticed the way the man's eyes shifted slightly, the way his jaw tightened. He knew the look. It was the look of someone who had just been confronted by the unexpected, the unthinkable. He looked away from Aftab, busied himself with the papers on his desk.

The passage emphasizes the emotional toll that microaggressions can have on marginalized individuals, as Aftab is shown to be aware of the man's reaction and the hurtful implications behind it. Microaggressions are often dismissed as insignificant or harmless, but they can contribute to the larger systemic oppression and discrimination faced by marginalized communities.

Counter-storytelling

As for the question of suffering, it seemed to Anjum that one could not really measure such things. Or compare them. Who's to say whose pain is worse? Worse than what? Why must suffering be weighed on a scale? Why is 'worse' better? Who taught these things? No. She would not play this game. She would not compete in the Oppression Olympics.

This extract illustrates the concept of counter-storytelling, which is a way of challenging dominant narratives and giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups. In this case, Anjum, a hijra (transgender) character in the novel, is questioning the societal norms that dictate how pain and suffering should be measured and compared. By refusing to engage in this game of "Oppression Olympics," Anjum is pushing back against the dominant narrative that positions certain groups as more deserving of empathy and attention than others.

She had never thought of herself as a writer, but she had a story to tell. It was the story of her mother and father, of her brother Musa, of Anjum and Saddam Hussain, and of the countless others who had been sacrificed at the altar of the nation. It was the story of Kashmir, of the siege, of the silence, of the ghosts. She did not know how to write a book, but she had decided that she would. She would learn, she would teach herself. She had bought notebooks and pens, and she had begun to write. She wrote every night, after she had cooked dinner and washed the dishes. She wrote until her fingers ached, until her back was stiff, until she could write no more. And when she

could write no more, she would lie down on her bed and stare at the ceiling, and the words would continue to swirl inside her head.

The above excerpt also emphasizes the power of storytelling in resistance and social change. By writing her own story, the protagonist is reclaiming her agency and voice in a society that has attempted to silence her and her community. Through her writing, she is also shedding light on the injustices faced by her community and contributing to a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant discourse.

The place had always been Muslim, but it was a tolerant, syncretic Islam. The village had its own way of doing things, its own unique blend of local customs and Islamic rituals. It was a village of fakirs and beggars, of storytellers and musicians. They had lived in harmony for generations, until the outsiders came. The Hindu fundamentalists arrived like a swarm of locusts, and they left behind a trail of destruction.

By presenting this counter-story, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* challenges the dominant narrative of religious conflict in India and offers an alternative perspective. It also highlights the importance of recognizing and amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives, as they are often silenced or overshadowed by dominant narratives.

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The above passage gives a counter-story to the dominant narrative of religious conflict and intolerance in India. The village described is a space of coexistence and religious syncretism, where local customs and Islamic rituals are intertwined. The arrival of Hindu fundamentalists disrupts this harmony and leads to destruction and violence.

All of above extracts from the *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* have underscored the need to address Social construction of race, Intersectionality, Structural racism, Microaggression and Counter-storytelling as form of discrimination. It calls attention to the pervasive and harmful impact of these subtle acts of prejudice on individuals and society as a whole, and encourages readers to actively work towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

Conclusion

This paper has maintained that Critical Race Theory can be employed to analyze how race, caste, class and gender are represented in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are Social construction of race, Intersectionality, Structural racism, Microaggression and Counter-storytelling basic tenets of CRT. The readers can understand how different form of oppression interacts with each other in the novel. The study has underscored the struggles of marginalized segments in Indian society. It reveals how power structure perpetuates social inequalities. Roy is bold enough to challenge dominant narratives while using various perspectives. She is successful in offering alternative ways of thinking about these social and political issues.

The study has revealed that this novel provides a platform of marginalized unheard voices to be heard. The study shows the importance of using CRT to analyze various literary studies, especially in the context of knowledge of the representation of the ignored communities.

Further research could also consider the potential for transformative pedagogy and political action that arises from analyzing literature through a Critical Race Theory lens. Comparative studies could explore how Critical Race Theory can be applied to different literary works across cultures and time periods.

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